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AUTHOR	Oelke, Karl
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses attempts made by the author to reinvigorate the College Honors Program at Union County College in New Jersey (UCC). Created in 1985 to offer an enriched learning experience for exceptional liberal arts students, the Honors Program helps students develop their thinking skills and achieve academic success. However, due to decreased enrollments, reduced resources, and frequent changes in directors, the program declined. Promising students who qualified for the program often opted to go to four-year institutions instead of UCC. Funding was also a concern, since full scholarships for honors students were discontinued. The author, appointed director of the program in 1995, implemented several means for recruiting both college and high school students, using various methods for identifying honors students and providing them with information about the program, visiting high schools, and advertising. Results of this initiative suggest that though enrollments are up only slightly, prospects look encouraging for the future of the honors program. (YKH)

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Reinvigorating a Two-Year College Honors Program

Karl Oelke

In: Issues of Education at Community Colleges:
Essays by Fellows in the Mid-Career Fellowship Program at Princeton University

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Karl Oelke
Mid-Career Fellowship Program
Prof. Ted Rabb
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It's Recruiting, Stupid!
(Reinvigorating a Two-Year College Honors Program)

Background

I was appointed director of the Honors Program at Union County College (NJ) on 1 June 1995. After ten years, the program was in trouble. It had started vigorously in 1985 and flourished for about four years, with reasonable numbers and high quality. Then, for a variety of reasons, including reduced resources, pressure to increase enrollments, and, not surprisingly, frequent turnover in directors, the program declined, in quality and numbers. After a committee's study, 1994-95, the administration decided to give the program another chance: if I could get both quality and numbers up in about five years, we would keep the program; if not, the program would go.

The Honors Program was developed to offer an enriched learning experience for bright students. The subject matter and teaching-learning approaches help students develop analysis, problem solving, critical thinking skills as well as the self confidence to equip them to transfer to any four-year college they can afford. In addition, the Program provides growth and development for faculty by offering them the opportunity to work with these students and provides enrichment to the College community with its lecture program.

Our honors program consisted of an option to the Liberal Arts Program. Although "friendly" to students interested in the humanities, the program discouraged participation by nursing, science, business, and engineering students because of the limited number of electives in their programs.[1] In addition, although the two-semester humanities course drew a reasonable number of students (not all of whom matriculated in the liberal arts honors program), it was always difficult to get enough students in the third semester course. (The independent study course was always handled on a per-student contract basis with individual faculty members.)[2]

The Challenge

The College prefers at least double digit enrollment in courses (or, in multi-section courses, double digit in each section) to allow them to run, and would like 15. That means making recruiting the first priority. However, numbers alone don't do the job: without academically gifted students, the program fails. The quality of instruction goes down, students attempting to transfer either don't or, if they do, they don't do well after transferring, and word of mouth does the rest. So recruiting means attracting academically gifted students.

What does the College have to draw upon? Located in a county with a heterogeneous population ranging from upper middle class New York City commuters to lower middle class blue collar workers, from wealthy suburbs to inner-city tenements, the College operates three campuses, one suburban and two urban, with several programs

in allied health technologies operating at a fourth campus where it owns two buildings (leased to the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey) on a site shared with the County Vo-Tech School.[3]

County and College demographics generally reflect what's happening throughout New Jersey, although Union County College is one of the largest in the state and one of the few multi-campus two-year colleges.[4] The county high schools may, however, differ from what other two-year colleges deal with. Attitudes of parents, students, and some guidance counselors reflect a negative attitude toward the local county college, making it difficult to recruit directly from the high schools.[5] I see some of that attitude reflected in reports of college placement of the top graduates of some of those high schools. One such report, listing the top 28 and 32 graduates from two recent years, listed schools like Harvard, Yale, Dartmouth, Stanford, Princeton, Columbia, Brown, Carleton, Weslyeyan, and Amherst.[6] Guidance counselors see no benefit to their image in having the local county college listed on their reports.

Another complicating factor in recruiting is the large number of colleges and universities in close proximity. Within a ten-mile radius of the College lie six four-year colleges (Drew, Fairleigh Dickinson, Rutgers [Newark], and Seton Hall Universities, The College of St. Elizabeth, and Upsala [only recently closed]) and one other two-year college (Essex County College). Just outside that ten-mile zone lie Bloomfield College (11 miles), Jersey City State College and Middlesex County College (12 miles), and the main campus of Rutgers University in New Brunswick (13 miles). This gives students who

might consider staying in the area an array of higher education choices rarely encountered in other counties. And it gives the Union County College recruiter an array of problems rarely encountered anywhere.

The criteria to enter the UCC Honors Program include a 3.5 GPA, 1100 SATs, standing in the top quarter of the high school class, or special talents. For students already enrolled at the College, we look for a 3.5 GPA. We believe those criteria will allow excellence of instruction that will prepare students to transfer successfully to the most competitive four-year schools. However, with that kind of record, students get accepted at most four-year schools and some competitive four-year schools, and get decent scholarships too. How to compete?

Part of our competitive disadvantage was our ability to offer an honors program only for students interested in the liberal arts. Nursing, science, business, and engineering majors had too few electives to complete the program. If we were going to attract more gifted students, we needed to find a way to offer honors designation to students interested in majoring in programs other than the liberal arts. And, if we were going to expand course offerings, we had to consider the quality of instruction we could offer. I did not want the program to set high standards without some assurance that we were also focusing on ways to assist students in meeting those standards. That meant some kind of faculty development opportunities.

Transfer has never been a problem for our honors program students. From the beginning, our students have been accepted at competitive colleges and universities. Princeton (when they accepted

transfer students). Columbia. William and Mary. Georgetown. Penn. Rutgers. Douglass. College of New Jersey. and Drew are just a few of the many places to which our students have transferred successfully. However. almost no one in the high schools knew of that record.

Scholarships were also a problem. Although one of our primary advantages is low cost (about one-tenth that of competitive four-year colleges and half that of the state colleges). many four-year schools offer generous scholarships to the very students we try to attract. When the program began. almost all of the honors program students were given full scholarships. However that ceased after about four years. and students had very little incentive. Finding funding for honors program scholarships remains a concern.

Advantages of the Program

Why would a student with the qualifications we demand want to come to the local community college instead of matriculating directly at an elite four-year college? Two primary reasons stand out: cost and nurture.

Tuition and fees at our two-year college run less than half those at the state colleges in New Jersey (less than $3000 vs. $8000 at Rutgers). and about one-seventh those of elite colleges (about $21,000). Getting the first two years' work done with us leaves students (and parents) with a sizable sum of money to invest in graduate school (or other college expenses).

We also provide small classes and nurturing instruction for the first two years. crucial in establishing a student's sense of self and

self esteem. Although many students are financially and emotionally prepared to face the challenges of an elite four-year college, many are not. Our small classes and caring faculty provide the attention that helps them develop the skills and confidence to work up to their potential.

For example, our laboratory science courses put students in small sections of no more than twenty (one of our honors sections had only nine students) with access to the most advanced laboratory equipment. The lectures are coordinated with the labs, and sometimes the same instructor does both lab and lecture. At many four-year colleges, the freshman laboratory science courses run with hundreds of students, with very limited access to the latest equipment, almost no access to the primary instructor, and often no coordination between lecture and lab.

An Approach

One of the first things we did was articulate our concept of an Honors Program. Our program supports the transfer function of the College's mission, and provides, within that context, enriched, qualitatively different instruction. Faculty teaching honors courses will generally:

1. Make the reading list longer and the content more comprehensive and demanding than that for regular courses. We're concerned not merely with **more**, but with **qualitative** difference.

2. Select teaching methods that respect the advanced capabilities of students and use a seminar approach whenever possible, involving students in direct, collegial participation.

3. Incorporate some form of self directed, independent study to help students develop into self starters, self motivators, and self teachers.

4. If at all possible, use a critical research paper as one of their assessment tools. Seeking material in the library, on the Internet, or in other sources, incorporating primary and secondary sources into an original formulation, and organizing the result in an interesting, articulate form is one of the most important experiences we can lead honors students through.

5. Use a cumulative final evaluation, using essay requirements that focus on integrating material in a clear, cohesive way, relating this material, if possible, to other disciplines and larger concerns. This is a major intellectual task honors students must learn to handle.

In a sense, faculty involved with honors students are coaches, preparing students for transfer to elite colleges and universities where their success depends on caring but demanding preparation.

Given those guidelines for the program itself, the challenges lie at the beginning, middle, and end of a process. To recruit the gifted students at the beginning, we need to show consistent transfers to desirable four-year colleges at the end. We also need effective programs of instruction in the middle. And somehow we need to get the news to the high schools of what is available for their gifted students. Because I want to focus here on recruiting, let me just say

that we ran some courses for faculty on the teaching-learning process, helped them develop some new course offerings, are making it possible for students to earn honors designation in other programs, and have initiated action to increase the number of full scholarships. We began a mentoring program so honors faculty could keep a close, nurturing watch on our honors program students. We were also fortunate to have students in the program who were accepted at Tier One colleges in 1996 and 1997 and have done well.

I can recruit from two pools of students, those already accepted at the College, and those in the high schools.[7] Within the College, I use four primary methods:

(1) Computer search. At the beginning of each semester, we get a list (with mailing labels) of students with at least 9 credits and a GPA of at least 3.3. Using that list, I write appropriate students, congratulating them on their academic record, describing the Honors Program and the courses, and inviting them to consider enrolling in the program or a course or two.

(2) Faculty search. Around mid-semester, about the time students will begin registering for the next semester, I ask all faculty to send me a list of students doing "A" work in their courses, students whom they think would do well in the Honors Program. I then check the students' records and, if they are doing well overall, write them, mentioning that their instructor recommended them, and ask it they're interested. I also do this at the end of the semester.

(3) Honors society search. Although the computer search will identify most of these students because of their grade point average, it won't identify them as honors society members, so I ask

faculty advisors of our student honors societies to recommend their students. When honors society students get a letter stating that their faculty advisor has recommended them, even if it's a second letter, the likelihood of their taking notice increases.

(4) Skills test search. The College requires most students to take a basic skills test when they enroll. The Director of Testing sends me the names and scores of all students scoring in the 90th percentile or above. When students score high in the tested areas (two in math, two in English), I send them a letter congratulating them on their high scores and invite them to consider the Honors Program.

I reach students outside the College in several ways.

(1) SAT search. Each year our admissions office gets from Educational Testing Service (ETS) a list of high school seniors, by zip code, who score above a certain level on their SATs. I use this to generate a mailing to all students above our 1100 guideline. Because this hasn't produced many students in the past, this year I'm going to address the letters to "parents of ..." and see if the response increases.

(2) Garden State Scholar search. Each year the State of New Jersey awards scholarships to high school seniors with high class standing and GPAs. I send them a letter offering to supplement their scholarship up to full tuition and fees if they enroll in the Honors Program.

(3) High school visits (1). I started calling on high school principals and guidance directors immediately after I was appointed Director. I've already mentioned the lukewarm response to the local

county college, even the Honors Program. However, I'm encouraged by the positive response of a few guidance directors, and will continue mailings, telephone contacts, and visits.

(4) High school visits (2), college nights. On those occasions when high schools invite college recruiters to visit, our College attends and on a few occasions I've gone along with the admissions people. In a room (gymnasium or cafeteria) filled with admissions people from elite colleges with well-known names or exotic settings, as well as well known colleges from the state, our county college display draws few inquiries, especially in the fall semester when hopes remain high for first choice schools. I haven't gone back since my first year on the job, but would like to see if I can find funding for a part-time assistant to do this kind of recruiting.

(5) High school visits (3), advanced placement. Through relationships with two guidance directors, I contacted two advanced placement program coordinators to discuss the Honors Program. One took the time to schedule a lengthy meeting, the other was not receptive to any follow-up visit. And the lengthy meeting has produced no results so far. When time allows, I may follow up on this avenue, but the original Honors Program Director discouraged much effort here. He said the advanced placement people wanted someone to teach a class or two, but would not consider recommending the county college to their students.

(6) High school Bridge Program. The College has what it calls a Bridge Program, which allows qualified high school students to take College courses to earn college credits and, if the high school

allows, credit for high school graduation at the same time. I've publicized the program to high school guidance directors, emphasizing Honors Program courses, especially the laboratory science courses and basic freshman courses, which at our College can provide small, nurturing sections of courses that, at larger four-year institutions are often offered in large sections in a threatening, impersonal environment.

(7) High school parent-teacher organization visits. On the recommendation of one high school principal, who said he and his guidance counselors were convinced of the merits of our program, but that the parents weren't, I've begun contacting presidents of the PTO/PTAs to speak to their organizations. Like some high school guidance counselors, some PTO/PTAs aren't interested, but enough are that I'm continuing the efforts here, believing that, over time, such contacts may begin to change people's perspective on the Honors Program.

(8) Lecture Series. For the past two years, we've offered a lecture series in conjunction with our two-semester humanities sequence (HRS 101-102), which brings to the College teacher-scholars from elite schools so students can experience the kind of instruction they will receive when they transfer. The series also provides a showcase to demonstrate to the community the kind of instruction going on in our Honors Program. Lecturers from Princeton University, Princeton Theological Seminary, Columbia University, Rutgers University, Georgetown University, and Drew University have all received very favorable notices. One serendipity occurred when Shirley Tilghman, a professor from Princeton University's

Department of Molecular Biology, who had been working on the human genome project, came to lecture on the ethics of genetic research the day after the story of the cloned sheep, Dolly, broke in *The New York Times*. Dr. Tilghman had been one of the readers of the Dolly paper and had recommended it for publication. The lectures have accomplished their primary purpose, to expose our students to the quality of instruction they can expect when they transfer. And the lectures have also begun to make an impression in our community, an impression designed to improve the image of the Honors Program and the College.

(9) Advertising. We have no sustained systematic advertising campaign in place for the Honors Program. The College recently hired a new public relations director who says she'll give some attention to our program when she works through some other priorities. This seems a crucial component of any effective recruiting program, so I'm anxious about how to proceed here in the face of her apparent lack of interest in giving the Honors Program a high priority in her budget.

Results

Enrollment is up slightly this year, but only because we have offered more honors courses and sections than ever before (new honors courses in logic and critical thinking, writing the research paper, biology, freshman composition, history, and psychology, as well as the four previously existing "HRS" courses), with a total enrollment beginning to approach that of the early years of the

program (65-70 students enrolled in honors courses, but only about a dozen matriculated in the Honors Program). However, average enrollment per section is not yet up to double digits, and this spring we had to cancel one of the previously existing sections, an evening section of a two-section course, because only four students enrolled.

Initial results indicate that the most efficient means of recruiting, at Union County College, now, is the in-house operation. This operation has produced the majority of our honors program students. After two years on the job, I can point to only three students who have come into the program directly from two high schools in the county. Talking to other Honors Program directors around New Jersey and at national conferences of the National Collegiate Honors Council, I learned that many other programs have been able to establish fruitful relations with local high schools. I haven't been able to do that yet. Whether that results from the large number of four-year schools nearby, the desire of many students to "get away," to parents wanting their children to attend prestigious schools, or just to our not doing an effective public relations job I don't know yet.

But the enrollments are up, if only slightly, and two guidance directors have called about specific students to set up interviews. So, overall, I'm encouraged. I'll continue to visit high schools, but will also insure that the in-house mailings and follow-ups get maximum effort, simply because that's where the majority of the students come from. We need excellence in teaching-learning techniques, nurturing mentoring, and quality courses in several disciplines. But it's recruiting that makes of breaks the program.

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[1] To earn a degree in the Liberal Arts/Honors Program students took four "HRS" courses and completed honors contracts in at least three other courses. The HRS courses included a two-semester humanities course (HRS 101-102) that covered major Western texts in philosophy, religion, science, literature, and the visual arts, emphasizing students' critical thinking skills. The third semester course (HRS 201), which varied in instructors and specific content each year, was a seminar focusing on the interaction between technology and social attitudes toward science, technology, values, and ethics. Finally, students completed an independent study (HRS 202) with a faculty member in a topic of the student's choice.

[2] Students were recruited from those who had already applied to or been admitted to the college. The criteria for admission to the program, or into the HRS courses if not in the program, included a GPA of about 3.5. Recruiting in the high schools was never attempted on a sustained systematic basis.

[3] The main campus is in a suburban setting in Cranford, surrounded by upper middle class communities and occupying a 48 acre site with several buildings of some 240,000 square feet. Urban campuses are in Elizabeth (one seven-story building of 102,000 square feet; it's already full and another building is being planned) and Plainfield (two buildings of 40,000 square feet). A majority of students (60%) attend classes at the Cranford campus. Two-thirds (64%) are female and somewhat fewer (60%) are white, both with some variation among the campuses.

[4] New Jersey population grew 5% from 1980 to 1990 and is projected to grow another 4.7% by 2000 (to over 8,000,000). Union County population decreased 2% from 1980 to 1990 and is expected to increase only 0.3% by 2000 (to 495,500). The largest decrease (35%) occurred among those under age 19, the largest increase (35%) among those age 65 and older. The percentage of Hispanics and Asian/Pacific Islanders increased from 1980 (10%) to 1990 (17%) and is expected to increase more by the year 2000 (22%). The percentage of the Black population remained and is expected to remain relatively constant (16%, 18%, and 18%). White population decreased from 1980 (74%) to 1990 (65%) and is expected to decrease by the year 2000 (59%).

Employment has increased in services, finances, insurance, real estate, transportation, communication, and public utilities, and decreased in manufacturing and public administration. Future job growth is expected in the health services, the pharmaceutical industry, and the transportation industry (with the expansion of air cargo facilities at Newark International Airport). Average income in 1990 in the 20 major towns in the county ranged from a low of $28,802 to a high of $75,122, with a median income throughout the county of $41,791. *Union County College Strategic Plan, 1995-96 to 1997-98.*

The College's mission includes providing programs to facilitate transfer to four-year institutions, facilities and faculty are adequate, but enrollment patterns are a major consideration. From the mid-80s through 1994, enrollment steadily rose (peaking at 7617 FTEs in 1994). Since then enrollment has steadily decreased (to 6750 FTEs in 1997). Interestingly, the Liberal Arts/Honors Program never had many students (it peaked at 14 in 1994), but the HRS courses always attracted enough students to keep the enrollments comfortably in double-digits, sometimes above 20.

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[5] There are 18 public and 10 private high schools in the county. Most parents and students at several (generally upper middle class) would prefer not to be associated with the local community college. At several other high schools (generally lower middle class) some parents don't see any reason for their children to attend college at all. In general, the more affluent the community, the less likely their children will attend Union County College directly from high school. However, we attract several from those schools who first try a competitive four-year institution, do poorly, and come home to lick their wounds and mature. But we don't see those students until a year or two after they graduate from high school, and then only if they apply to our college and take the basic skills test, where their high scores bring them to my attention.

[6] Interestingly, similar reports from predominantly lower middle class high schools list only college acceptances with no listing of class rank and usually include local, New Jersey schools as well as an occasional Tier One school.

[7] We do get some other students from the community because of word-of-mouth and occasional advertising, but not a significant number.

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